

westways

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APRIL 1982



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P O BOX 435
PORT HUENEME

were across the channel. The sun broiled my forehead pink like a lobster. Santa Cruz Island came into sharper focus—green hills laced with spring flowers. Breezes puffed our sails.

"Can you smell that?" Mike asked. "Sort of like kelp and salt? If you're from Kansas you call that 'the smell of the ocean.' But sailors know it's the smell of *land*. It's caused by waves hitting the shore."

After an hour an eastern swell rolled toward us from the direction of Ventura. Mike tugged on his graying beard, thoughtful, then went below and turned on the shortwave radio.

The weather channel confirmed what Mike had read in the wind-driven swell: Santa Ana condition. Freakish, quirky winds that destroy such trifles as sailboats.

We must cruise to the other side of Santa Cruz, putting the island's mass between the gusting winds and us. Staying on the mainland side we would be too vulnerable.

In a rising wind we moved across the island's face which was pocked like the salt-scarred cheek of a sailor. The ragged, haunting grotto called Painted Cave lay 30 feet away. Its first chamber is large enough to sail into; salts and lichens paint the walls, colors glow. But it is the inner chamber, reached only by dinghy through a jagged tunnel, that lures adventurers—a journey to the island's heart, 500 feet from sunlight.

But that day we had to pass by. Water rolled around the entrance as though the sea were undergoing a soft and silent earthquake. Swells poured in and banged around the walls, and the battered kelp smelled like fresh fish.

When we neared the end of the island an oil tanker passed in the distance in a private smogbank of sulfurous yellow. Then Santa Rosa Island came into view across a five-mile channel and we rounded Santa Cruz into the "Potato Patch," a mile-square section of seawater with a

rough reputation. The air turned blustery and wet. While I watched with wide eyes, eight-foot waves swelled and peaked at our stern, slipped under the boat and moved past at a rapid clip.

Mike cranked the tiller hard and we turned into Forney's Cove, a long bay set into treeless hills. A few cows were finishing up a day of serious grazing. As we dropped anchor, a warm breeze puffed from the northeast and made Mike cock his head. "Santa Ana winds," he said.

By sunset the wind stood at 30 knots and rising. White stains streaked the cove, as if meringue had been set out in the propwash of a B-20 bomber. Even at anchor the *Caballo Blanco* listed at a 15-degree angle, and when Mike went below to start dinner the stove swung from its gimbals sideways.

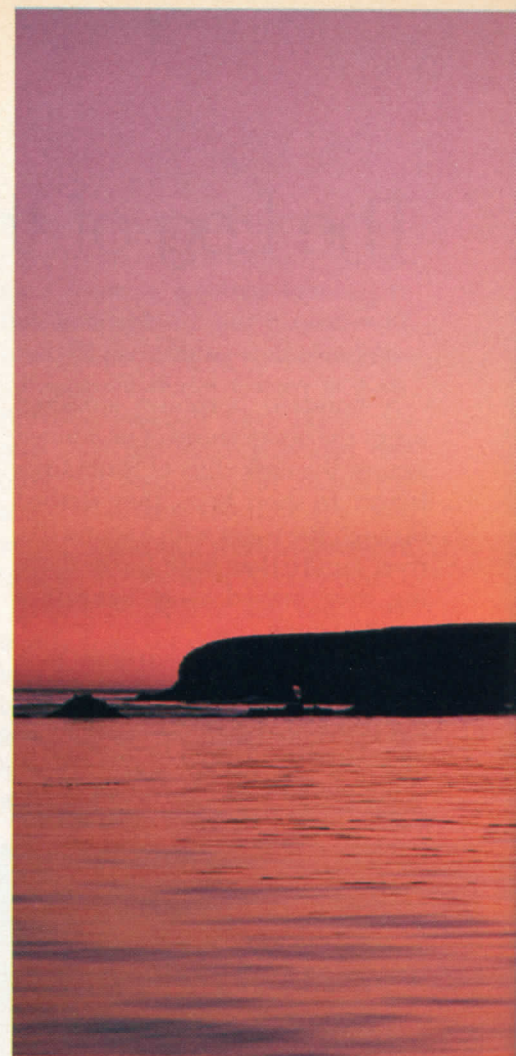
Huddled against the wind, I watched our anchorline stretch tight as a noose, shiver, and then slacken again as the White Horse bucked against its bridle. Good, sturdy half-inch line, I told myself. But only that half-inch prevented us from flying downwind onto black rocks.

After dinner—delicious chicken curry on a bed of rice—we decided to try sleeping and I unrolled my sleeping bag in the cockpit. As my eyes closed, I saw against the stars the plywood blade of the self-steering mechanism waving in the wind.

During the night the wind rose to 60 miles an hour, shrieking over the hills to howl in our rigging. In the hours near sunrise I fell asleep deep in the bottom of the sea. When I sat up, the water was flat and innocent; Forney's Cove was one seamless smile.

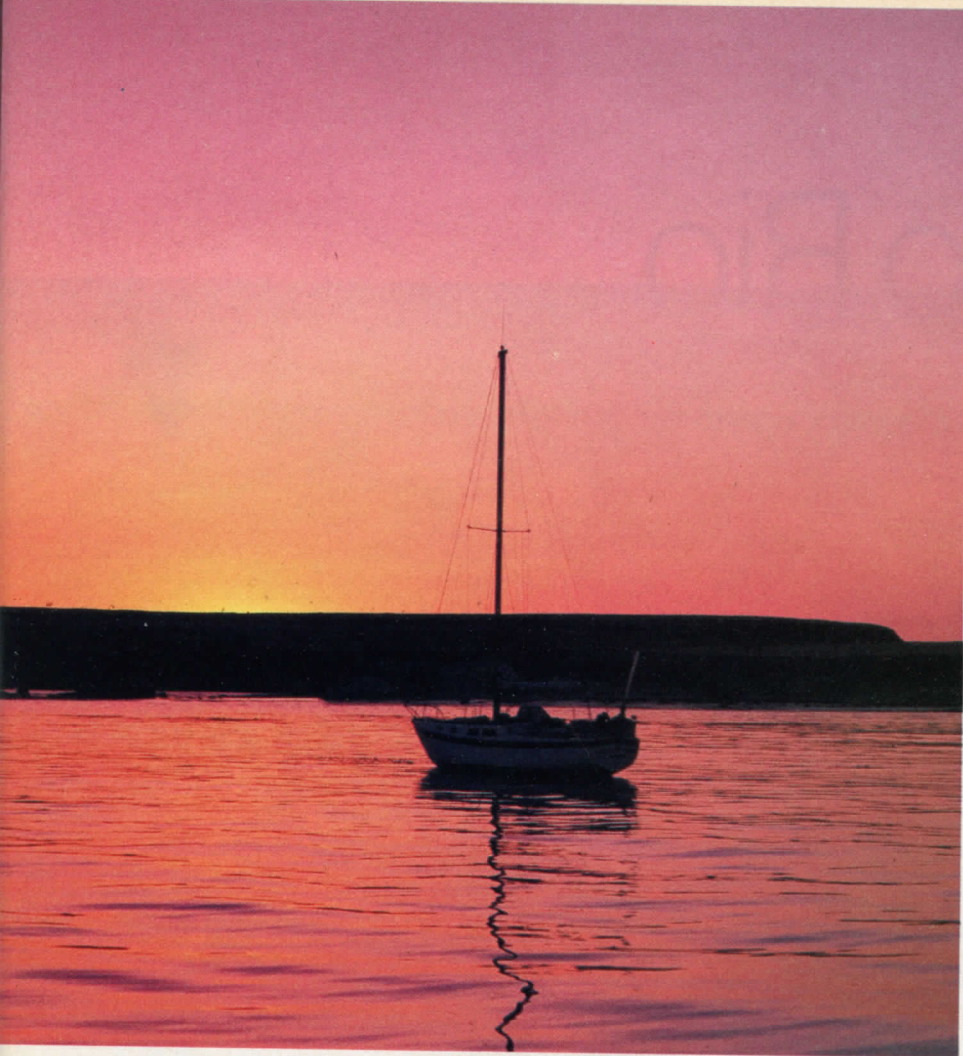
Mike shoved a mug into my hand. "If you don't want sugar, don't stir your coffee," he said. "Some night, eh?" I nodded, gazing through the steam from my mug.

At mid-morning we clambered into the boat's rubber dinghy and rowed ashore. Around us the hills



rolled soft and green; it was as if the cattle country of central California had been flooded with seawater. Yellow flowers spread across the flatland above the cliffs, and as the eye followed them into the distance, one's sense of scale expanded and the heart leaped. Yet this whole vast island had long ago been the domain of one man, Justinian Caire, a French immigrant who ruled it as his duchy.

One day Santa Cruz will be part of our newest public playground, Channel Islands National Park. (Today it remains in private hands.) But it will never become another Yosemite; there's not enough fresh water for that. Visitors are strictly limited and guards patrol to protect the island's fragile environment. (Mike Pyzel holds a special permit to land on Santa Cruz. Every visitor must make similar arrangements with the Santa Cruz Island Com-



Silhouetted by a brilliant sunset, *Caballo Blanco* lies at anchor at Forney's Cove

pany, 515 South Flower Street, Los Angeles CA 90017; (213) 485-9208.)

In tidepools among the rocks purple urchins bristled at our touch; tiny abalone shells turned pearly faces to the sky; anemones, waiting for dinner to drift by, waved green arms in welcome. Not a gum wrapper or film box intruded, not a sandwich bag or styrofoam cup. Once all of California was like this.

With the sun over the yardarm we returned to the boat, popped open cold beers and weighed anchor for the mainland side of the island. The pointy noses of harbor seals followed us through the water like tiny periscopes. Clumsy sea lions waddled across the sand, then in the water became dancers. Above us on the cliffs, sheep grazed at improbable angles, while between their hooves yellow coreopsis flowers shook in the breeze.

Above an *Continued on p. 82*



Sailing sights in the Channel Islands include California sea lions (1), wildflowers above the cliffs at Forney's cove (2), leaping porpoises (3) and Pelican Bay at Santa Cruz Island (4)



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CABALLO BLANCO

Continued from p. 53 anchorage called Cueva Valdez, Chumash Indian shell middens striped the hillside with white. Mike once found an Indian skull here, exposed by harsh weather at the foot of an oak tree and in peril of rolling off the cliff to the rocks below. To salvage it, he took it to the University of California's Anthropology Department. There they put the skull into a bag, tagged it and wrote a number on the tag. Then they carried it to another room. Mike peered around the corner and saw shelf after shelf of numbered bags.

He covered over the next two skeletons he found, exposed by wind and rain on Santa Cruz Island.

At anchor in Cueva Valdez, we ate dinner in the setting sun, its glow lighting our furled canvas and polished brass. Bone-weary after our night of mad winds, we looked forward to a good sleep. But before long a westerly breeze rose. We would have to change anchorages or else spend a sleepless night on a rocking boat.

Our mainsail filled and we began to run before the wind, moving in silence with the immense presence of the island on our right side. The stars threw light upon the sea. Tiny marine organisms glowed in the choppy water of our passage and our wake was a trail of stardust. A school of fish flashed through the water, lit up like Broadway.

Was this wondrous scene a reward for enduring last night's angry gale, or simply another face of a protean god, the sea?

For information on charter sailing trips to the Santa Barbara Channel Islands, call or write: Mike Pyzel, 86 Olive Mill Road, Santa Barbara, California 93108; (805) 969-4195. Mike can accommodate groups up to four; reservations should be made four weeks in advance. Mike Pyzel is a U.S. Coast Guard licensed operator, former Coast Guard officer, and director of the Pyzel School of Navigation.



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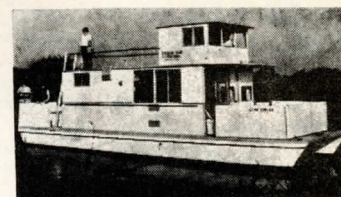


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